

GUEST ESSAY

Democrats Need to Stop Seeking Oppressors — Real or Imaginary

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Economic populism is all the rage among Democrats — and for good reason. Many workers have been left behind economically and socially. The affordability crisis is real, and Americans without a college degree haven’t benefited much from the economic growth of the past half-century. In the age of artificial intelligence, all of this can get worse.

Populism enables politicians to speak for ordinary people, in a language that is familiar, clear and appealing. It can be an effective means of building a mass movement that can obtain power and produce leaders who govern in a way that tackles the key issues in our economy and society.

Populists do not shy from pointing out sharp differences, but today what we need is a populism that does more to unite than to divide. I call it “big-tent populism” — the kind of populism Senator Jon Ossoff of Georgia channels when he says, “We should be able to unite people behind the principle that in the wealthiest country in the world, no one should go without care for lack of money.”

A big tent, when erected, has enabled some of the biggest progressive successes of the past century. The Swedish Social Democratic Workers’ Party (SAP) pioneered modern

social democracy, by abandoning its Marxist roots and appealing to the middle classes as well as to workers and farmers. Though SAP remained closely integrated with the labor movement, it also strove to work with corporations to improve the lives of ordinary people. Social democracy took its modern form after the historic 1938 Saltsjöbaden accord between trade unions and business interests — a bargain made possible because the party had worked to build bridges with corporations in the 1930s. This laid the foundations of the corporatist model, with high wages and high investment, that defined the Swedish economy for the entire postwar era.

The situation in America around the same time was different, but Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies were backed up by another broad coalition of strange bedfellows that included the educated progressives in his brain trust, the labor movement and conservative Southern Democrats.

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Big-tent populism can still work today, but only if Democrats are willing to bring together small businesses and segments of the managerial class that already support the party.

There is plenty to do under this banner. We need to make A.I. benefit workers rather than run amok as an automation technology displacing millions. The United States has a monopoly problem that has led to inefficiencies and higher prices, a public health crisis that has made the country less healthy and shorter lived than other developed economies, an underperforming education system, crumbling infrastructure that holds back economic opportunities, and declining communities that need jobs and hope. These problems can be tackled, especially if a government intent on tackling them has broad support and has made promises that it can deliver on.

Big-tent populists don't have to shy away from combativeness. Opponents, even enemies, can be useful for a mass politics movement. It is always easier to define what you stand for by contrasting it with what you stand against, and sometimes this is a good method for building motivated coalitions. Roosevelt, for example, took aim at the big corporations that criticized his agenda: "We know now that government by organized money is just as dangerous as government by organized mob," he said in a 1936 address. "They are unanimous in their hate for me — and I welcome their hatred." Critics called him a "traitor to his class" — but he did work with corporations and the rich, and it was clear that he was striving not to tear down the system but to better it.

The big danger with populism is when it turns *entirely* adversarial. Today, in an ecosystem shaped by social media, competition for attention and polarization, this is a particular risk.

When every problem is described through the prism of a struggle between oppressors and the oppressed, populism rarely comes with a big tent.

Signs of an adversarial turn are easy to find. As a candidate, Zohran Mamdani, now New York City's mayor, said flatly, "I don't think we should have billionaires." Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez put it more sharply: "You can't earn a billion dollars. ... You can get market power, you can break rules, you can do all sort of things. You can abuse labor laws, you can pay people less than what they're worth, but you can't earn that."

The question is not whether their anger is warranted. It is whether a politics organized around blaming oppressors can build a majority and then govern with it.

History suggests that a purely adversarial populism would lack the broad coalition necessary not just to win power but to govern effectively. In New York, Mr. Mamdani made affordability a centerpiece of his campaign. Now, as mayor, he is facing a challenge: either double down on some of the policy promises, such as city-run grocery stores and subsidized transportation, even if they are unlikely to deliver long-term solutions to affordability, or seek more comprehensive strategies that may require a big-tent approach. Mayor Mamdani announced a business advisory council to assuage some of the criticism from business leaders, but they remain skeptical.

Equally important is the philosophical foundation for mass politics. The center-left, whose roots are firmly in liberal ideas, must stand for pluralism in a diverse society. Once a significant fraction of the population (the businesses, the bankers, the tech sector) starts being viewed as oppressors, pluralism becomes difficult or even impossible.

The Democrats tried this once before. In 2020, through what has been recently called "Woke 1.0," they embraced a form of cultural politics that saw the world as imbued with oppressed-oppressor dynamics. It also sought to impose that oppressed-oppressor frame even on those who were, from time to time, inadvisedly put in the oppressor camp (including many non-college-graduate whites).

It further alienated a group that had once made up a sizable bloc in the Democratic coalition: the working class (those without a college degree and often working in manual or service jobs).

Big-tent populism also offers an effective synthesis between progressives and centrists in the Democratic Party. Centrists are right that governance is critical to delivering

effective services to citizens, and this requires feasible policies, not just slogans. Progressives are right that we need new ideas to tackle inequality, create opportunities for workers and the poor and limit the excesses of corporate power.

Today, more than ever, the left must formulate a new governing philosophy that can energize mass politics. Populism can and should be a major part of that, but only if it speaks for ordinary people, and in their language, rather than seeking oppressors, real or imaginary.

Daron Acemoglu is a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the author of “What Happened to Liberal Democracy? Remaking a Politics of Shared Prosperity” and a recipient of the 2024 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, shared with two other academic researchers, Simon Johnson and James Robinson.

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